

# Freud and the language of humour

'ONLY joking' – It's one of the most common phrases in the language, frequently used when our attempts to be funny seem to be leading to problems. But can a joke be 'just a joke'? Or is there much more involved in humour? These were among the questions Freud pondered when he tried to solve the riddle of why we laugh.

Over the past few years I have been turning back to the work of Freud, seeking to reinterpret his central idea of repression in terms of language (Billig, 1999). In doing so, I have attempted to connect the new ideas of discursive psychology with some old ideas of psychoanalysis. I have looked at the topic of humour, especially its darker side, and suggested that ridicule plays a central role in social life (Billig, 2001a). I have also been investigating the humour of extreme bigotry (Billig, 2001b, 2002). This work is at a comparatively early stage, but I hope eventually to connect it with my earlier reinterpretation of Freud.

Freud's great work on humour, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (first published in 1905) bears careful re-examination. Even its limitations and failures are instructive. Freud himself had a great love of humour, telling jokes as he elaborated his ideas. By looking carefully at his theory a number of key issues, including that of ethnic humour, can be highlighted.

Humour: Rebellion and instinct  
Too often in the past, psychologists and philosophers have taken an oversimplified



At the Annual Conference in Blackpool, MICHAEL BILLIG questioned whether Freud's analysis of jokes revealed his own repression.

approach to humour, sometimes assuming that a single principle might provide the key to the topic. By contrast, I would suggest contrary assumptions are required. For instance, humour is universal – it can be found in every society. Yet it is also highly particular, for there is nothing that is

## 'Jokes, like dreams and slips of the tongue, bear the traces of repressed desires'

universally funny. Not only are there cultural and individual differences in humour, but these differences are frequently invested with moral meaning. We laugh at particular things and we disapprove of laughter at other things. Humour can be a matter of contention: there is a politics, morality and aesthetics of humour.

It is also reasonable to say that humour is social. We laugh with others, and laughter can help strengthen social bonds. As Bergson (1911) wrote, laughter appears to stand 'in need of an echo'. But at the same time, humour can be antisocial: we can laugh at others. The dangerous divisiveness of laughter can be seen in racist or homophobic jokes.

Freud's approach to humour needs to be placed in its historical and intellectual context. Freud wrote *Jokes* during the early days of psychoanalysis, before he had become a public figure and before he was using terms such as 'id' and 'superego'. *Jokes* was the last in a triad of books that each took a seemingly trivial feature of mental life and argued that it contained

profound clues about the working of the mind. First Freud had dealt with dreams in *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), and then slips of the tongue in *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901). In many ways, *Jokes* is the most satisfactory of the three books.

All three works express the tragic vision of humanity that lay at heart of Freud's thinking. According to Freud, there is a fundamental conflict between the demands of social life and our instinctual urges. Society demands that sexual and aggressive instincts be repressed or pushed from conscious awareness. Freud argued that what is repressed returns to haunt us in disguise. Jokes, like dreams and slips of the tongue, bear the traces of repressed desires. Sexual and aggressive thoughts, which are forbidden in polite society, can be shared as if they are not serious. Humour then becomes a way of rebelling against the demands of social order. As Freud wrote in a later essay, 'humour is not resigned it is rebellious' (1927/1990, p.429).

There is a strong element of rebellion in the sort of humour that Freud included and celebrated in *Jokes*. His book contains wonderful Jewish jokes, full of the irony that he so loved. There are jokes about schnorrers (beggars), about match-makers, about rabbinical arguments and so on, all turning round the customary logic of the world. These were the sort of jokes that Freud's follower Theodor Reik was to present in his book *Jewish Wit* (1962). In Freud's book there were also darker Jewish jokes, playing uncomfortably with stereotypes and prejudices.

Certainly Freud knew a fund of Jewish jokes that he used to tell colleagues in

## WEBLINKS

Freud links: [www.mythosandlogos.com/Freud.html](http://www.mythosandlogos.com/Freud.html)

Freud Museum, London: [www.freud.org.uk](http://www.freud.org.uk)

*Humor* (journal): [www.degruyter.de/journals/humor](http://www.degruyter.de/journals/humor)

Different types of jokes: [www.nyfreudian.org](http://www.nyfreudian.org)

Michael Billig: [www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/ss](http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/ss)

private. Freud's biographer Ernest Jones (1964) wrote that Freud had no outward characteristic of being Jewish except for his love of telling Jewish jokes. So it is with Freud's book on jokes: it contains no outward sign that the author is Jewish, except that the author tells Jewish jokes.

In telling Jewish jokes, Freud was engaging in a courageous, rebellious act. Here was Freud completing his three controversial books, which were making very little public impact. Psychoanalysis was a minority taste, shared only by a few followers, who were Jewish. Freud himself had virtually no contacts with the formal academic world of Vienna, nor with the academic medical establishment. He strongly suspected that he had been the victim of discrimination – not so much because of his ideas, but because he was Jewish.

At the turn of the 20th century, anti-Semitism was a fact of life in Austria. The mayor of Vienna, Karl Lueger, had been elected on an explicitly anti-Semitic platform. There were anti-Jewish riots in the outer regions of the Austro-Hungarian empire. It was, of course, going to get much worse throughout the next 40 years. In this climate, in Vienna, how could a Jewish psychologist write a bestseller? There is no doubt that Freud wanted to. Otto Weininger, a disturbed young Jew who had converted to Christianity, had shown the way in 1903. His *Sex and*

*Character* was a text of self-hate as he argued that Jews shared the weakest, most 'effeminate', degenerate racial characters. The book was a sensational success. And how does Freud react? He tells Jewish jokes in an act of intellectual rebellion.

#### Joke-work or self-deceit?

Freud's approach in *Jokes* can only be briefly summarised here. He starts by analysing the formal properties of jokes or what he called their 'joke-work'. His analysis is, in actuality, a piece of sophisticated discourse analysis. He argues that jokes resemble dreams, with both operating by condensing meanings and substituting signs. In puns, for example, the same word comes to stand for two different meanings.

For all the linguistic sophistication that Freud showed in analysing joke-work, his purpose was to explore the psychological dynamics behind it. He made an important distinction between *innocent* and *tendentious* jokes. Had he made analogous distinctions in relation to dreams and slips of the tongue, he would have avoided some of the criticisms that were to be levelled against his earlier two books.

Innocent jokes were those that did not fulfil deep psychological functions. These may be jokes that purely and simply make a play on words. By contrast, a large number of jokes, according to Freud, are tendentious in that they permit repressed

desires to be voiced. Under the guise of a joke, the thought is presented as if it is not serious: it is 'just a joke'. Freud argued that most tendentious jokes express sexual or aggressive impulses, or both.

Having distinguished between innocent and tendentious jokes, Freud then offers a great insight. He claims that both sorts of joke use the same sort of joke-work, but that tendentious jokes produce much greater laughter. If this difference in enjoyment cannot be explained by differences in joke-work, then it is explicable in terms of the psychological meanings that jokes express.

People, if asked why they are laughing at a joke, will tend to point to the cleverness of the joke-work. Because we like to think that the joke-work is the source of our enjoyment, we do not know why we laugh. From this, Freud then argued that self-deceit lies at the root of much enjoyment of humour. We want to believe that our humour is moral like ourselves – that we are innocently enjoying good jokes, which are 'just jokes'. However, the sound of laughter has an aggressive cackle that permits momentary pleasure in unfeeling cruelty. As such, tendentious jokes are never merely 'just jokes'.

What did Freud himself repress? If Freud is correct that self-deceit attends much humour, then this should apply to the jokes that he tells in his book. Here lies a paradox. If we take Freud's ideas seriously, then we should distrust what he says about his own jokes. Regarding *Jokes*, we can examine what Freud misses out – indeed, what he represses – from his text (Billig, 1999).

First of all, Freud omits the most obvious material that would confirm his theory – namely, dirty jokes. *Jokes* is a very decorous book. There is nothing very crude except an abstruse sexist joke that compares wives to umbrellas. Indeed, Freud goes out of his way to show that this particular joke has a respectable provenance: he relates how he encountered it when reading a jokebook of an artists' carnival. He does not want to appear the sort of man who spends his time cracking dirty jokes in the company of other men.

There is another theoretically significant omission in Freud's book. Freud mentions how social superiors are the targets of aggressive jokes that mock and downgrade authority. Many of Freud's Jewish jokes seem to fit this pattern: ghetto Jews are mocking the world that oppresses them. This rebellious view of humour suggests

match-makers, visit communal bath-houses or even attend synagogue. He only tended to use Yiddish when making his Jewish jokes.

Certainly, some of Freud's jokes repeat disturbingly unflattering stereotypes of ghetto Jews. For instance: Two Jews meet outside a bath-house. One asks the other 'Have you taken a bath?' 'No,' replies the second, 'why, has one gone missing?' In repeating the stereotype and by writing in the purest German, Freud distances himself from being identified as that type of Jew. In this respect, there is an element of self-deceit in presenting such jokes – or rather in presenting his own telling of such jokes – as insider jokes.

Nevertheless, little in the area of humour is straightforward. As Ernest Jones said, Freud showed no outward Jewish characteristics except when telling Jewish jokes. Thus, his retelling of the unflattering bath-house Jewish jokes was a way of appearing, indeed being, Jewish. Even when apparently distancing himself from Ostjuden, he was also announcing himself to his readers as Jewish.

This raises another theme that Freud was reticent to explore in his book. He was showing rebellion against, even anger at, the polite world of gentile respectability, which was denying him advancement. So many of the Jewish jokes that he included ridicule the logic of this world. They bring the conventionally successful down to earth and delight in the subversion of authority. Even the codes of cleanliness are subverted. The bath-house jokes do not merely mock supposedly dirty Jews; they also mock the clean gentile world and its orderly logic.

*Jokes* does not contain unambiguously anti-Semitic jokes. Freud's characterisation that such jokes reproduce negative stereotypes is too simple. In fact, some extreme racist jokes do not even use stereotypes. Freud would certainly have heard such jokes. One of Lueger's associates had joked about a good technique for baptising Jews: aspiring converts to Christianity should be held under water for 10 minutes. Freud would have read about such remarks. They express extreme hostility, but those who enjoy such jokes can excuse them as 'just jokes', not thinking of themselves as harbouring murderous intentions.

Over 10 per cent of jokes on Ku Klux Klan joke websites are of this type (Billig, 2001b). They express hostility without stereotypes, thereby differing from the sort of ethnic jokes more usually studied by

#### Rebellious humour: Thinking a joke is not enough, for joking needs to be a social act

the joke as something intrinsically benign. Who can really object to a bit of rebellious joking against social superiors? We have all been children, and have all liked to smirk at teachers and parents.

By contrast, Freud hardly discusses aggressive jokes against supposed inferiors, such as the powerless and those who transgress social order. These are not the jokes by the child against the parent, but represent something that has been much less discussed in the psychology of humour: the jokes made by the parents at the expense of the children. Here the joker is not a rebel but a conservative who uses mockery to maintain social order and roles of power within that order.

This points to the role of ridicule in maintaining order. The sociologist Erving Goffman asked why people follow the everyday, micro-codes of behaviour. His answer was that they do so because of the fear of social embarrassment (Goffman, 1967). However, he did not then ask why embarrassment might be feared. A simple answer would be that embarrassment is funny to others. If we break social codes, then we fear that others might laugh at our infringements, mocking our inappropriate behaviour. Thus, fear of mockery may be the key means for maintaining social order. Humour, far from being principally rebellious, also fulfils a deeply conservative function (for more details of this argument, see Billig, 2001a).

Freud deservedly has a reputation for fearless thinking – for going intellectually where others feared in his search for the mainsprings of human irrationality. However, there was one aspect of human irrationality that he drew back from investigating. Despite his life coinciding with the worsening position of European Jewry, he never explored in any systematic way the irrationality of anti-Semitism.

*Jokes* does not analyse anti-Semitic jokes told against Jews, or indeed other forms of racist humour. It is as if such jokes were too risky to include, for they might be enjoyed by the readers. Twice in the book, Freud mentions that Jewish jokes told by insiders differ from those told by outsiders. The jokes of insiders, suggests Freud, mention both the good and the bad qualities of Jews, whilst those of outsiders (i.e. anti-Semites) only mention the bad qualities. He offers no examples of such outsider jokes.

Contrary to what Freud implied, he was not fully an insider, at least in relation to the Jewish jokes he tells in his book. His Jewish jokes are about the ghetto Jews of East Europe – the Ostjuden who spoke Yiddish or, like his parents, highly accented German. There is evidence that Freud, as a young man, had been embarrassed by the obviously Jewish traits of his parents. Certainly, Freud as an adult was not living the life of his joke-figures: he did not use

humour researchers (e.g. Davies, 1990). For example:

*What do you call three blacks at the bottom of a river? – A good start.*

Like the baptism joke made by Lueger's associate, and unlike the bath-house joke, this joke does not make play with stereotypical qualities that are ascribed to the victim. There are also non-racist versions of the bottom-of-the-river joke:

*What do you call three lawyers at the bottom of a river? – A good start.*

The joke can be easily customised for different audiences. To a group of academics, one might ask:

*What do you call three RAE assessors at the bottom of a river? – A good start.*

Academics are likely to find the RAE version more amusing than the lawyer version, whilst being disgusted by the black version. This differential response illustrates the key point of Freud's theory. It is not the joke-work that makes us laugh (or not laugh), but the impulse behind the

joke. These impulses have moral and political dimensions. The lawyer and RAE versions depend for their humour on the knowledge that no one is seriously advocating violence against these targets, and, thus, differ crucially from the racist version. If the lawyer version were being told within a totalitarian state, that was executing lawyers for defending political 'criminals', then the joke would take on a different character. It would resemble the racist version. Racists continue to practise violence against blacks, just as Lueger's associate knew that Jews were victims of violence in the Austro-Hungarian empire. In these contexts, the joke turns the reality of racist violence into a matter of amusement, and the laughter becomes a sign of sympathy with the perpetrators of actual racist aggression. This is why such violent racist jokes are not 'just jokes' (for more details, see Billig, 2002).

Freud's last moments in Vienna indicate both the conservative and rebellious nature of humour. When the Nazis took over Vienna, it was by no means the end of laughter. A majority of the Christian population celebrated. Jews were forced to scrub the streets with toothbrushes. The crowds gathered to laugh at respectable

citizens so demeaned. It was fun, just as it was to be a year later when German troops pulled the beards of old Polish Jews. This was not humour as rebellion but the humour of power.

At almost the last moment, Freud managed to obtain the paperwork to leave Vienna for England. As a final step, he had to sign a form saying that he had not been mistreated by the Nazis. He told his son that he had added the words 'I can thoroughly recommend the Gestapo'. It seemed one last act of rebellion. The document has surfaced recently, and it appears that Freud never wrote the words (Ferris, 1997). Even the Gestapo would have understood his irony. The joke might literally have been the death of his wife and children. As it was, four of his sisters failed to escape. The joke could not be spoken, or written. But it could be thought. Thinking a joke is not enough, for joking needs to be a social act. So Freud told the joke to his son, pretending that it had already been made. As such, the joke contained an element of deceit. Such is the strangeness of humour that this element of deceit does not diminish the essential morality of the joke. Nor does it detract from the greatness of its creator.

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